

The Grime

by ReadWorks

Octavia normally would have been embarrassed to rattle off her accomplishments to a total stranger. She'd had to do this enough times, in job interviews usually, so she was used to the squirming discomfort that comes with saying: I graduated with these honors at this university with this GPA and did this and that and, yes, what a rewarding experience, I learned so much, and on and on.

She had done this enough times to know that her discomfort came from the fact that she sort of liked to boast. She knew she *shouldn't* like it! So she was stuck in the middle. Or, rather, not in the middle, but slapped back and forth, from smug satisfaction to self-disgust and back again, like a tennis ball over a net.

Here, though, it was completely different. Sitting in a stuffy, windowless office across from a man without a tie. Octavia wearing casual clothes herself. The atmosphere relaxed. Nothing at stake. She had come to help people. The rest didn't matter.

The man across from her was in his fifties, probably. He had a bristly graying mustache and the air of a man resigned to good humor, as though he had given every style a fair try, and settled finally on shrugging shoulders and a half smile.

Octavia could tell he was impressed with her. Why shouldn't he be? Because, let's face it, she was perfectly qualified. Great school, great grades, great experience, young, energetic, up on the latest methods. In two words, a catch.

The man across from her leaned back in his chair, resting one arm on the chair's armrest, and his chin in his palm. His knuckles were buried in his mustache. He had a daily calendar on his desk, the "funny" kind. Every day was matched with a joke. Octavia imagined that ripping off the next sheet in the morning to find a new joke might be the bright spot of someone's morning.

Octavia got her biggest kicks not from talking about her schooling or her grades, but from talking about why she wanted to volunteer to teach illiterate adults to read. She explained to Paul-that was the mustached program director's name-how she had never volunteered before, how she wasn't even the type to volunteer, how if you had asked her just two months ago whether she would ever commit twenty hours a week just to *pre-volunteer training*, she would have bet her bottom dollar: nope.

"So," he asked her, "what changed?"

"That's the thing!" Octavia's eyes lit up. She was leaning over Paul's desk now, bursting with enthusiasm. She felt alive. "It just...popped up. I mean, I don't know, I was just clicking around Wikipedia the other day, like I do practically every day, and I was on, like, Belgium, and then horse-hair paintbrushes, and then experimental stringed instruments, and then, somehow, adult illiteracy. And I started reading, and it was just-I don't know, out of nowhere I wanted to be a part of this, to volunteer, to help and see for myself. I don't think I'm a tourist, you know? I'm not here to experience the grime and then go home and tell my friends about it over sushi. It's not like that. I just...think I can help, and feel compelled to."

Everything Octavia said was true. But in bed that night, her words ran in a loop in her mind, over and over again.

Octavia's worst qualities were at war with her best. On the one side were pride and arrogance. On the other were enthusiasm and passion. She wondered: was she attempting to volunteer just for the show of it, or did she truly care about making a difference? Would she try to learn, as well as teach?

Octavia didn't know. It was too difficult to separate one motivation from the next. They were tangled up with each other, and she wasn't sure where one ended and the other began. She lay in bed and struggled with what had gone on in the office. She replayed the words she'd spoken, as if someone else had said them. She thought not "Is this who I am?" but "Is this how I want to be?"

What Octavia came to understand was that her identity was complex: her character wasn't simple, wasn't driven by any one thing. She was made up of parts. Some of those parts wanted to learn. Some parts wanted to teach. Some were arrogant, and some were humble.

She realized that the one thing she could be certain of was this: no matter her intentions, the end result would be the same. She would help adults learn to read, and wasn't that most important? The consequence? She had just begun to wonder if a selfish intention had the power to taint a worthwhile outcome when sleep came.

arrogant ar · ro · gant

Advanced Definition

adjective

1. having an attitude of inflated self-importance; haughty.

These wealthy and arrogant foreigners had lived in the country for years without attempting to learn a word of the native language.

2. of or pertaining to such an attitude.

The spoiled young prince was noted for his arrogant behavior.

Spanish cognate

arrogante: The Spanish word *arrogante* means arrogant.

These are some examples of how the word or forms of the word are used:

1. Jamie's mother echoed Jamie's words and made them sound absurd and **arrogant**, not hopeful, the way Jamie had intended.
2. Some were **arrogant**, and some were humble. She realized that the one thing she could be certain of was this: no matter her intentions, the end result would be the same.

enthusiasm en · thu · si · asm

Definition

noun

1. a strong, happy interest in something.

He has more enthusiasm for playing the piano than for anything else.

He listened to my ideas with a lot of enthusiasm.

Advanced Definition

noun

1. intense interest or excitement concerning; zeal.

I had very little enthusiasm for this latest business venture of his.

She showed so much enthusiasm about the job that he couldn't turn her down.

The fans were full of enthusiasm at the beginning of the season.

2. something that causes such interest or involvement.

Horseracing is one of his few enthusiasms.

Spanish cognate

entusiasmo: The Spanish word *entusiasmo* means enthusiasm.

These are some examples of how the word or forms of the word are used:

1. She was leaning over Paul's desk now, bursting with **enthusiasm**. She felt alive.
2. If their **enthusiasm** for my growing were matched in inches, I'd be ten feet tall.
3. She was a cheerleader type and always liked to show her **enthusiasm**. "Who can think of a Z for music?" Marisa shouted,
4. I gave in and considered it, cautiously at first and then with increasing **enthusiasm**. When the song ended, I got up and went back to Maude.
5. Henderson now believes Gates's **enthusiasm** and commitment are powerful enough to overcome the remaining challenges. "It's going to take heroic measures to be able to stop [polio]," he admits.

intention in · ten · tion

Definition

noun

1. a plan.

He went to college with the intention of getting a degree.

Advanced Definition

noun

1. a decided course of action; plan.

She went to college with the intention of studying biology.

2. a directed purpose or goal.

The intention of the meeting was to consider the resolution.

3. the aim or meaning something is meant to convey.

We couldn't understand the author's intention in the poem.

4. (pl.) a person's plans as distinct from his or her actions, esp. in regard to motive or morality.

Her parents were suspicious of the man's intentions.

These are some examples of how the word or forms of the word are used:

1. Scientists and health experts around the globe continue to study nuclear radiation. They hope to harness its powerful benefits to continue to help people. When it's used **intentionally**, radiation can be a boon to human health.
2. Chlorine is added in many public water systems to kill germs, but it can leave an aftertaste. Another chemical, fluoride, may be added to public water because it is helpful in preventing tooth decay. Not all chemicals are **intentionally** put in, though. Pipes can shed lead or rust. In certain parts of the country, runoff from nearby farms can taint the water.
3. I didn't ask, but I had to guess that this man had **intentionally** bred the two larger, golden colored dogs together, so the results would be the lovable puppies I was in the process of adoring. In making this choice, this man was doing something that past breeders and farmers had been doing for years-he had selected the specific traits he liked, and made sure they were passed down to the next generation.

Name: _____ **Date:** _____

1. Where does Octavia's discomfort come from?

2. What is Octavia's conflict in this story?

3. Read the following sentences from the story.

"What Octavia came to understand was that her identity was complex: her character wasn't simple, wasn't driven by any one thing. She was made up of parts. Some of those parts wanted to learn. Some parts wanted to teach. Some were arrogant, and some were humble."

What can be concluded about Octavia based on this information?

4. Octavia explains to Paul why she wants to volunteer to teach illiterate adults to read. Based on what she says to him, what can be concluded about why she wants to volunteer?

5. What is a main theme of this story?

6. Read these sentences from the story.

"Octavia's worst qualities were at war with her best. On the one side were pride and arrogance. On the other were enthusiasm and passion. She wondered: was she attempting to volunteer just for the show of it, or did she truly care about making a difference?"

What does it mean that Octavia's worst qualities "were at war" with her best?

7. What word or phrase best completes the sentence?

Octavia's identity is not simple; _____, it is complex.

8. What does Octavia come to understand about herself?

9. As Octavia lays in bed, why does she struggle with what had gone on in the office?
Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

10. Octavia analyzes the motivations behind her decision to volunteer. What does this analysis reveal about Octavia? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
